United States Department of Agriculture

Bradford Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project

Scoping Document

Forest Service
Allegheny National Forest

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Introduction

We are proposing to improve wildlife habitat diversity on the Bradford Ranger District of the Allegheny National Forest by increasing the young aspen component, restoring direct sunlight to rock outcrops and boulder fields, and pruning and releasing apple, fruit and mast shrubs and trees. This scoping document was prepared to share our plan and request public feedback before a decision is made.

Why is This Project Needed?

The Allegheny National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) establishes a vision for wildlife habitat across the forest. As part of that vision, we are striving to maintain diversity to support a variety of mammals, birds, invertebrates, reptiles and amphibians. To do that, we have identified several needs to address.

Aspen Regeneration

Aspen is a relatively uncommon forest type on the Allegheny National Forest. Approximately 2,700 acres are scattered across the entire forest, which means that aspen is found on less than 1% of forested lands. It is important to wildlife and provides very good habitat for species associated with forest margins and openings.

Aspen reproduces most commonly from root sprouts (suckers). Under natural conditions, these sprouts are created by larger scale natural disturbances, like wildfires, windstorms, or other events that remove overstory vegetation and restore sunlight to the forest floor. These large-scale natural disturbances are lacking on the Allegheny National Forest, and aspen trees are beginning to deteriorate and die as they age. Fewer sprouts are produced as a result, and aspen stands will eventually be crowded out by competing species that are longer lived and more shade tolerant.

Regenerating aspen stands (even small ones and clones) would help provide habitat for ruffed grouse and other wildlife associated with young forests including deer, bear, snowshoe hare, woodcock and a wide variety of songbirds. Ruffed grouse would benefit, in particular, since they are strongly associated with different successional stages of aspen, ideally adjacent to each other. Ruffed grouse territories range in size from 5 to 25 acres, and young aspen provides ideal habitat for breeding and protection from predators.

Daylighting Rock Outcrops and Boulder Fields

Rock outcrops provide unique wildlife habitat on the Allegheny National Forest. They are used by a large variety of species (including amphibians, reptiles, birds, small mammals, and large carnivores) for shelter and cover. They also provide valuable basking areas where reptiles can warm themselves on the rocks, which are warmer than the surrounding environment. These areas are especially valuable to timber rattlesnakes, which are a Regional Forester Sensitive Species.

Under natural conditions, large-scale natural disturbances would remove overstory vegetation. These disturbances would reduce canopy cover, increase the amount of light hitting the rocks below, and provide the warmth needed for rock outcroppings to be valuable basking habitat.

These large-scale natural disturbances are lacking on the Allegheny National Forest. As a result, the canopy continues to grow over existing rock outcrops. This reduces the amount of light hitting the rocks, which causes a decline in both rock temperatures and the quality of habitat.

Apple, Fruit, Mast Shrub and Tree Pruning and Release

Apple and crabapple (*Malus sp.),* hawthorn (*Crataegus* sp.), blueberry (*Vaccinium* sp), huckleberry (*Gaylussacia* sp.), and other Viburnum shrub species are important to a large variety of wildlife. Their soft mast production and flowering stage are beneficial to a wide variety of pollinators. Unfortunately, Apple trees tend to become overcrowded unless they are actively maintained, and other trees and shrubs can be shaded by overstory species. This decreases the amount of available sunlight these species need to grow, and leads to reduced flower and fruit production.

What's the Plan?

Where Are We Planning to Work?

Treatments will occur in suitable management areas of the Bradford Ranger District where aspen stands, apple trees, fruit trees, mast shrubs and trees, rock outcrops, and boulder fields are located.

When?

Treatment will begin as early as summer 2020, and will then occur on an as-needed basis.

How?

Our plan is to use a combination of the treatment methods discussed below.

Aspen Regeneration

Up to 20 acres per year of aspen stands will be regenerated annually using a combination of release and clearcutting.[1]

Release

Some stands will receive a release treatment first. Tall-growing woody vegetation will be manually cut up to 50 feet out from parent trees and along the edge of certain stands. This will increase the amount of light available to young aspen, promote clonal root suckering, and help to expand select stands out to make them larger.

Conifers, trees containing cavities, trees containing stick nests, and butternut trees will not be cut during release treatments.

Clearcutting

Clearcutting is the optimum method for maintaining aspen due to its intolerance for shade, its physiological requirements for suckering, and the early age at which it deteriorates and declines

[1] Additional treatments may be needed in some cases, including scarification, fencing, shelters, or supplemental planting. These treatment methods are outside the scope of this project, and will require a separate analysis if proposed in the future.

in regeneration potential. Trees will be felled between November and the end of March using hand tools or chainsaws, and will be left on site. No ground disturbance is anticipated because implementation will not use heavy equipment, and will only occur during fall or winter when soils are dry or frozen.

All applicable Forest Plan standards and guidelines will be implemented, including, but not limited to, those listed below. Other best management practices will also be applied as needed.

- Clearcutting shall only be used when it is determined to be the optimum method of regeneration. (See Forest Plan p. 68.)
- Clearcutting will be limited to management areas 1.0 (early structural habitat), 2.1 (uneven-aged management), 2.2 (late structural linkages), and 3.0 (even-aged management). In more limited cases, it may also occur in management area 6.1 (late structural habitat). See Forest Plan, pp. 65-66.
- Single tree selection should only be applied if needed to achieve management area or multiple use objectives. (See Forest Plan p. 68.)
- In management area 1.0, aspen stands should require a minimum aspen stocking of 20 square feet basal area or 10 healthy mature trees per acre to assure successful regeneration. (See Forest Plan p. 104.)
- In management area 1.0, regeneration cutting of aspen should be done during the dormant season. (See Forest Plan p. 104.)
- In management are 2.1, even-aged management may be used to maintain shorter-lived shade intolerant forest types such as aspen. (See Forest Plan p. 108.)
- In management area 2.2, even-aged harvests in the aspen forest type may occur in areas up to 20 acres in size to provide an early structural component in the corridor and maintain these shorter-lived shade-intolerant forest types. These treatments should not compromise connectivity by completely bisecting the corridor and should not adversely impact habitat for species with viability concerns. (See Forest Plan p. 111.)
- Treatments may only occur within riparian corridors if designed to restore the composition, structural diversity, or health of a riparian corridor or riparian dependent species. They will not occur within 200 feet of Wilderness Trout Streams, Remote Trout Streams, or Class A Trout Streams. Treatments within riparian corridors must also be designed to maintain protected uses by avoiding downstream effects to stream temperature, and trees should not be removed within 10 feet of stream channel banks.

Daylighting Rock Outcrops and Boulder Fields

We are proposing to daylight rock outcrops and boulder fields, especially in areas where timber rattlesnakes can be found, by cutting and girdling trees on up to 5 acres per year. These activities will occur during the November to March timeframe, using hand tools or chainsaws, and vegetation will be left on site. No ground disturbance is anticipated because implementation will not use heavy equipment, and will only occur during fall or winter when soils are dry or frozen.

Conifers, trees containing cavities, trees containing stick nests, and butternut trees will not be cut during release treatments.

Apple, Fruit, Mast Shrub and Tree Pruning and Release

We are proposing to prune and release apple trees, fruit trees, and mast shrubs and trees (approximately 300 per year). Hand tools or chainsaws will be used, vegetation will be left on site, and brush piles will be created to provide small mammal habitat. No ground disturbance is anticipated because implementation will not use heavy equipment. Implementation will vary by time of year:

- Treatments will not occur during nesting season (April 1st to July 1st).
- Pruning will occur between November and March.
- Tree release will generally occur between November and March, but some work in areas with a high concentration of apple trees may occur earlier (any time after July 1st).
- Conifers, trees containing cavities, trees containing stick nests, and butternut trees will not be cut.

What Happens Next?

The next step for this project is to determine whether these activities will have a significant effect on the environment. This review occurs under the National Environmental Policy Act, and can take the form of a categorical exclusion, environmental assessment, or environmental impact statement.[2] We anticipate using a categorical exclusion,[3] but will consider public comments and determine if extraordinary circumstances are present before making a final decision on the type of analysis required for this project.

How to Comment

If you would like to provide feedback on our plan for wildlife habitat improvement before a decision is made, we ask that you submit comments no later than June 27, 2020.

- Comments may be sent by mail to Rich Hatfield, District Ranger, Bradford Ranger District, Allegheny National Forest, 29 Forest Service Drive, Bradford, PA 16701.
- Comments may be emailed to **comments-eastern-allegheny-bradford@usda.gov**. Please enter the project name (***Bradford Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project***) on the subject line, and include your name and physical mailing address as well.

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[2] Categorical exclusions are applied if activities fall within an existing category and will not result in significant effects. Environmental assessments are prepared if activities do not fall within the scope of a categorical exclusion, or if more analysis is needed to determine whether an effect will be significant. Environmental impact statements are prepared if a significant effect will occur, or if the activities normally require the preparation of an environmental impact statement.

[3] The activities proposed fall within the scope of the categorical exclusion for wildlife habitat improvement.

- Comments may also be provided by calling 814-363-6000. Normal business hours are 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and 12:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Please note that all comments received, including the names and addresses of those who submit comments, will be part of the public record and are available for public inspection.

For More Information

Additional information is available online at https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/allegheny/landmanagement/projects and can also be obtained by contacting Steve Rutkowski, Wildlife Biologist, 814-363-6071